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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 001507

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SUBJECT: SAUDI-IRANIAN "WAR OF WORDS" ESCALATES

REF: A. RIYADH 1408

1B. RIYADH 1303

1C. RIYADH 1396

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Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith for
reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY:

11. (C) The constant low-level tensions that have historically characterized the Saudi-Iranian relationship appear to be escalating in recent weeks, amidst an atmosphere of uncertainty in the region and increasingly angry rhetoric surrounding the Hajj. Spillover from the conflict in Yemen has increased worries about Iranian meddling, and added fuel to a fiery "war of words" being played out in the media and sermons. Saudi officials, including the King and the Grand Mufti, have reacted with sharp warnings to keep politics out of the Hajj and reiterated the SAG's right to defend its territory against attacks. While the SAG is not on a collision course with Iran, they are increasingly willing to let sermons and the media try to settle the score. End Summary.

SEEING IRAN'S HAND IN A MYRIAD OF PROBLEMS

12. (C) Iran has long been on par with Israel as the Saudis, favorite scapegoat for regional problems. The SAG is fond of accusing Iran of interfering in Iraqi politics (ref A), meddling in Lebanese affairs (ref B) and, most recently, lending it support to the Houthis in Yemen (ref C). That many of these accusations have some basis in fact only lends credence to the Saudis, continued suspicions of a Persian plot to gain influence in the Arabian Peninsula.

13. (C) If recent GCC statements are any indication, the Saudis have been able to convince other countries in the region to share their greater-than-usual sense of unease. In response to an increasingly charged atmosphere in the region created by Iraqi instability, Lebanese political deadlock, Palestinian disunity and Iran's increasingly evident nuclear ambitions, recent statements issued from GCC meetings have contained thinly veiled warnings that Iran should think twice. In early October, the GCC met to discuss Iraqi security and announced the need for non-interference in Iraqi affairs by "foreign governments". In a statement released following the GCC Interior Ministers' meeting in Oman on Oct. 27, the ministers vowed to "support the stability, territorial integrity and unity of Yemen," and called for "non-interference in internal affairs." While the GCC is a multilateral body, the Saudis have a heavy hand in shaping GCC statements and policy.

¶ 14. (C) In addition, the Saudis have reached out to Syria in recent months as an attempt, in part, to contain Iran's growing influence in the region. In early October, King Abdullah made a much publicized visit to Damascus for a meeting with President Bashar Al-Asad. While few official comments came from the meeting, it was noted that both countries supported the Lebanese right to self-government and called for non-interference in the Lebanese political process. (COMMENT: While none of these statements refer directly to Iran, it is clear that the continued calls for "non-interference" refer to fears of Iranian influence that could destabilize the region. End Comment.) Other contentious topics, such as Yemen and Iraq, were also on the table. The visit was widely touted in the press as ushering in a new age of Arab unity, an opportunity for Syria to distance itself from Iran and be welcomed back into the Arab fold.

THE HAJJ AS POLITICAL THEATRE

¶ 15. (U) These ongoing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have recently been manifested in a new "war of words" surrounding the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. In a statement to a group of Iranian pilgrims departing for the Hajj, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that pilgrims should "confront attempts that damage its (the Muslim nations) unity and progress." Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said that Tehran would take "appropriate measures," if Iranian pilgrims faced any restrictions during the pilgrimage. Ahmadinejad went so far as to say that "Iranian pilgrims face immoral and inhuman treatment by Saudi authorities."

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¶ 16. (U) The statements from Iran were considered a grave insult to the Saudis, who take great pride in their administration of the Hajj, and were widely interpreted by the SAG as continued criticism about Saudi treatment of Shia in the KSA. In a Nov. 2 statement from the weekly Council of Ministers meeting, King Abdullah said that Saudi Arabia will not allow anyone to, "disturb the atmosphere of the Hajj, put pilgrims' safety at risk or attempt to disunite Muslims."

KHATAMI VS THE GRAND MUFTI

¶ 17. (U) The clerics have also joined the fray. On Oct. 31 Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al-Sheikh rejected Iranian calls for utilizing the pilgrimage to declare "bara'ah from the mushrikin," release (from responsibilities to) the polytheists. This statement refers to Sura 9, Verse 1 of the Quran, which says that God and his messenger are released from their contractual obligations under treaties they have made with polytheists. It is interpreted by many as an instruction for Muslims to repudiate their ties with polytheists, and is used as an anti-western rallying cry by Iranian scholars. (NOTE: Many conservative and fundamentalist Muslims both Sunni and Shia believe that Christians should be considered polytheists because they "worship a trinity" rather than a single god. The Quran itself is ambiguous on this point, since some verses characterize Christians as "people of the Book," but others vilify Christians as polytheists for worshipping more than one god. End note.) Al-Sheikh said there was no such thing as the "bara'ah" and warned against exploiting the hajj to serve "personal motives." Iranian religious scholar, Ahmad Khatami, swiftly contradicted Al-Sheikh and said that bara'ah is a religious duty clearly stated in the Quran. "If the Grand Mufti cannot read," Khatami said, "he can get someone to read for him." (NOTE: Strictly speaking, Khatami is correct, since Sura 9, verse 1 frees believers from their

legal obligations to polytheists, but goes on to say that such actions don't apply during the holy months, which include the Hajj. "Good polytheists" are exempted and polytheists who seek protection must be accorded safe haven. Like many religious passages, these verses are subject to many interpretations. End note.)

IRAN: "SHIA ARE MISTREATED"

¶8. (U) In a variation on the theme of Sunni-Shia discord. Iran's semi-official Fars News Agency Wrote on November 6, "The Saudi security forces arrested many Shia on trumped up charges and are trying to prevent the holding of any religious ceremonies by the Shia." In a Nov. 2 press release, Fars complained that Iranian pilgrims arriving in Jeddah were detained for 7 hours by immigration police. They called the treatment of the pilgrims, "something reserved for criminals and terrorists."

ENTER THE HOUTHI CONFLICT

¶9. (C) Amidst this increasingly rancorous back-and-forth over the Hajj and the treatment of Shia and pilgrims in KSA, the Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen has spilled across the border into Saudi Arabia. Fighting has intensified on yet another front in the war of words. Saudi and other Arab media sources have for weeks insisted that the Houthi rebels are supported by Iran, allegations that, while believable, have never been confirmed (ref C). Al-Alam TV, the official Iranian Arabic-language channel, on the other hand, had been alleging active Saudi support of the Yemeni government, and carried speeches by Iraqi Shia leader Moqtada Al-Sadr in which he professed his support for his, "Houthi brothers in Yemen." Al-Alam TV was recently removed from Arabsat and Nilesat, provoking an outcry from Iran. Anti-Iranian rhetoric in the news papers has grown even more aggressive following the weekend's fighting (septel), and the Iranian Fars News Agency has fired back with allegations the Saudi Air Force has used white phosphorous to bomb the Houthis.

WE HAVE THE MISSILES TO DEFEND OURSELVES

¶10. (C) With a rebellion just across the southern border and editorials increasing their hawkish tone, the Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA) flexed its military muscles in a

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recent missile defense display. In a front page article in Al-Jazirah on Nov. 4, a spokesman for MODA said, "The Kingdom owns enough defensive missiles to protect its establishments," and described a recent test fire of four Patriot anti-ballistic missiles. Denying that the military exercise was a message to any country, Prince Khalid bin Sultan, Deputy Minister of Defense and Aviation added, "these are defensive weapons that can be used for protective measures." While the test itself was routine, the prominent coverage it was given was likely no coincidence.

WE DON'T WANT TO FIGHT UNNECESSARILY

¶11. (C) Unease with Iranian intentions is found throughout many ranks of the SAG. In response to the Ambassador's questions about the Saudi Arabia National Guard's (SANG) readiness for the Hajj, Deputy Commander of SANG, Abdul Mohsen Al-Tuwaijri replied, "The Iranians have been making provocative statements about the Hajj. We do not want to fight unnecessarily, but the Iranian regime is not rational."

COMMENT:

¶12. (C) The always difficult Saudi-Iranian relationship has become increasingly strained in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran's growing nuclear ambitions and destabilizing regional activities. Saudis point with alarm to Iranian meddling in Iraq, and to its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen. The Houthi rebellion in Yemen may be driving them to increasingly aggressive posturing, but the traditionally confrontation-averse and pragmatic Saudis will likely keep their military actions to the border region. Neither the SAG nor Iran want to see this conflict escalate to a full fight; for the time being, they will be content to fire back and forth via editorials and sermons. End Comment.

SMITH